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Opinion • Commentary

Losing the War against Terrorism

Washington.

THERE ARE four reasons why the United States is losing the war against terrorism:

- First, most do not understand there is a war or how to fight it.
- Second, the United States does not understand the rules of this war when hostages are involved.
- Third, the United States has

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not demonstrated the commitment needed to win.

- Last, but most important, the United States does not have the counterterrorism intelligence system that depends on human sources, which is needed in order to fight wisely.

Consider the reasons one at a time. Most do not understand there is a war because there is no Terrorist nation, no Terrorist flag or uniform or insignia. There are no command posts or headquarters in the traditional sense. Terrorism is considered a criminal or social aberration rather than the battlefield that it has become. The rule is: no war, no commitment.

The terrorist war is fought on multiple fronts. It is not a passing social phenomenon, and it is going to get worse. This will be evident once terrorists use nuclear material. The enemy ranges from those conditioned by religious zeal thriving on persecution and retaliation, stateless groups, to the Red Army Faction and Red Brigades, the latter criminally motivated and conditioned by marxism. There are several hundred terrorist variations in between. There is no central command center, though some groups, like the Red Army Faction, Direct Action and the Irish Republican Army, share strong networks. They wear similar but also very different ideological uniforms. None are the same.

We are experiencing only the first stages of worldwide terrorism of which the United States is becoming the chief target if not the leader in victims. During 1984, 2,700 violent terrorist acts were recorded. About 4,000 victims were killed, and another 4,000 victims were wounded by 125 terrorist groups known to be operating worldwide but principally in 50 countries. Only 42 groups were causing violence in 1978.

U.S. citizens, property and interests were the chief targets, accounting for about 40 percent of all major acts of international terrorism (defined as acts anywhere against citizens or property of one country by terrorists from a different country). Figures for 1985 indicate a 15 percent increase over 1984. These were not random attacks; in most cases, they were deliberately intended as attacks on U.S. sovereignty.

A second reason the United States is losing the terrorist war is that hostages play a decisive role. Most people do not recognize that hostages are soldiers in this war and that we cannot continue to lose battles because we concentrate on saving our hostages. It is far better to pay the ransom if saving the hostages is the chief policy objective. Many nations pay tribute for just this purpose now. However, if stopping terrorism is the chief objective, then retribution is the best solution. That proposition is hard to accept, but it needs to be said.

The third reason the United States is losing this war is that we yet lack a commitment to win. Ideas intended to prevent terrorism, now flooding forth, are five years overdue and are daily tempered by a nation not yet demonstrating the dedicated commitment, the political will, needed to win. A poll indicated in late 1985 that 44 percent of the respondents favored negotiating for release of U.S. hostages even if it required giving in to terrorist demands. Sixty-six percent favored a bounty — paying someone else to bring terrorists in dead or alive. That's not political will — that's apathy.

It is not a lack of spending from the national treasury that has stymied a solution. We are blindly throwing dollars at the problem. Billions of "antiterrorism dollars" are buried in the budgets of federal agencies. The citizens of this nation have spent the money to win this battle. But antiterrorism requires more than money — it requires education, training and, above all else, commitment. Without commitment, every dollar spent for antiterrorism is wasted.

Despite tough public statements condemning terrorism, the United States long ago needed to exercise its antiterrorism determination. The government needed to demonstrate determination by refusing U.S. air carriers permission to fly into insecure airports and by refusing other carriers permission to fly from those airports to U.S. ones until minimum security standards were achieved. The Department of State repeatedly lacked the commitment to enforce this and similar preventive actions overseas. Most of all, airports in the United States, supervised by the Federal Aviation Administration, need to set the example. Now they do not. Passengers aboard TWA Flight 847 and the Achille Lauro who did suspect terrorists were boarding had no one to tell.

Finally, the most critical weakness is that the most technologically advanced nation in the world lacks the intelligence about the enemy necessary to win this battle. This nation's counterterrorist intelligence is, quite candidly, inept. This nation does have a superb counterterrorism force, but it does not have a superb counterterrorism capability. It is lacking the most essential ingredient of all — counterterrorism intelligence.

Intelligence about terrorists and terrorism depends chiefly on human

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sources to develop the clues necessary to understand the methods of terrorists, their tactics, capabilities and intentions. Needed is police-type intelligence — not the sort of intelligence obtained from senior officials in foreign governments, on which the CIA concentrates, or investigative intelligence collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Needed is the modus operandi of the kind collected well by big-city police and that enhances prediction. Federal agencies have never understood how to do that well.

Combat raids to effect retribution are complex and require special skills and resources, but they are comparatively simple when compared to executing raids to effect rescue. As a rule of thumb, the worst time to attack terrorists is after they have taken hostages. Successful rescue has been demonstrated by the British SAS, the German GSG-9, the Israelis and by the Italians during the rescue of Gen. James Dozier. But the risk is exceptionally high, not only to the hostages but also to the assault force. Unfortunately, because of deficient intelligence and poor antiterrorism practices, the only alternative usually left to counter-terrorist units is to attack at the best possible time during the worst possible situation. The attempted rescue of passengers held aboard the Egyptian airliner in Malta makes this clear.

A place to start may be separat-

ing the position of director of the CIA from that of Director of Central Intelligence; they are now the combined but impossible duties of one person. Call them what you may, but make the former a professional intelligence officer with recent command experience and the latter a political appointee to impose intelligence policy on all of the nation's intelligence agencies. Secondly, when appointing panel members to "review intelligence issues," include members with current field experience. They add critical insight and temper the intellectualism of members appointed to accommodate policy goals.

The United States can win the terrorism war if it organizes smartly to fight. It needs to develop a plan of battle; to focus more on finding and destroying the enemy than on rescuing hostages; to commit to all the sacrifices demanded by antiterrorism, and if that fails, to strike with the fury of counterterrorism units; and to develop the right kind of intelligence to find the enemy and plan the battle. Finally, the nation needs the kind of leadership required to fight this war — special kinds of leaders, not politicians who serve as "crisis managers" — if the war against terrorism is to be won.

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